

Uncommonly successful English/language arts programs share common instructional features

A team of researchers led by Dr. Judith A. Langer sought to answer a critical question: *What characterizes English instruction in secondary schools whose students beat the odds and outscore their peers in comparable schools on high-stakes, standardized tests of English language skills?*

Under the auspices of the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA), which Langer directs, the

team analyzed a broad spectrum of English programs in forty-five classrooms in four states over five years. The common instructional features found among the schools are described briefly below and compared to typical schools that are less successful. These features are explained in detail in Langer's research report, *Beating the Odds: Teaching Middle and High School Students to Read and Write Well*.*

Exemplary English instruction at the secondary level: six essential features

1 STUDENTS LEARN SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE IN MULTIPLE LESSON TYPES. Effective teachers teach skills in “separated,” “simulated,” and “integrated” contexts. Instead of primarily depending on one approach to teach an important skill such as using quotation marks, teachers artfully weave the skill into a variety of lesson types. They might teach it directly at one point—**separated**—as a lesson in itself. At other points they find ways to teach it in context — **simulated** — perhaps by examining how quotation marks are used in a literary text they are reading. Teachers find a variety of creative and purposeful ways for students to **integrate** the skill within the context of broader activities.

Colleagues teaching in typical schools often rely primarily on one lesson type. They tend to teach primarily out of context (separated) or primarily within the context of larger activities (simulated or integrated), but they fail to use all three lesson types.

2 TEACHERS INTEGRATE TEST PREPARATION INTO INSTRUCTION. Effective secondary teachers integrate test preparation into their instruction, inundating their classrooms with activities that target the skills, strategies, and knowledge students need in order to be successful not only on

high-stakes tests, but also when reading or writing at school, work, and home. Educators in effective programs dissect the test to understand the knowledge and skills needed to succeed on tests and in other academic and real-life situation. Over time, such test preparation occurs in a framework of skills identified through reformulation of the curriculum in response to assessment demands.

In contrast, teachers in typical schools confine their test preparation – if any – to a focus on the surface features of the test. This instruction focuses more on how to take the test rather than on how, over time, to actually gain and retain the knowledge and skills that underlie what is being tested.

3 TEACHERS MAKE CONNECTIONS ACROSS INSTRUCTION, CURRICULUM AND LIFE. In effective programs, teachers interweave skills and knowledge across lessons as well as beyond individual units so that what students learn transcends instructional boundaries and connects to what they have learned and are learning and doing at other times in English class, in other classes, and in life. For example, high school students engaged in an interdisciplinary unit on “Motion” study frostbite and Mt. Everest at the same time that they read Jack London’s “To Build a Fire.” They are constantly asked to



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think, discuss, and write about connections concerning the physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects of motion. They write about the hero's mental journey as well as his physical journey. They discuss the relationship between movement and change and relate this relationship to any work on movement and change they do in physics, math, social studies, or Project Adventure—as well as in English class.

In typical schools, connections within the discipline of language arts, with other disciplines, or with students' daily lives are often not made overt.

4 STUDENTS LEARN STRATEGIES FOR WAYS TO DO THE WORK. Students in effective programs are taught intentional ways of thinking and doing. They learn approaches to focus and structure their thinking as well as strategies

for completing tasks. For example, middle school students might be asked to reflect on their “completed” research papers and evaluate how well they have researched and planned them. This reflection helps students see not just whether they have done the assignment as instructed but whether they have actually done enough. Did they spend enough time researching, thinking, and reviewing their projects? How might they better approach their next assignments? In this and other ways, students learn procedural and meta-cognitive strategies that help them monitor their own progress and anticipate and cope successfully with new situations and demands.

In contrast, typical programs tend to limit their instruction to a particular topic or skill and do not explicitly teach students how to plan, organize, and reflect on their work.

5 STUDENTS ARE EXPECTED TO BE CREATIVE THINKERS. Students in effective programs meet the learning goals of particular lessons and units and are then encouraged to explore further—to find ways to gain deeper understanding of the topic by using their new knowledge as a springboard from which to probe ideas and expand beyond them. Even after meeting targeted

achievement goals, students are encouraged to generate their own ideas and expand their literary understandings and frameworks. They are expected to be generative thinkers – to know names, definitions, and facts, and then to explore the additional roads that the new knowledge suggests.

In typical schools, teachers tend to move on to a new topic once material is “covered.”

6 CLASSROOMS FOSTER COGNITIVE COLLABORATION. Effective English teachers know that language learning is a social activity involving the exchange, discussion and investigation of ideas. In their classes, understandings and capacities grow and deepen through thoughtful interactions with others, both present and imagined. Students regularly engage in collaborative and active group learning. Students share ideas with each other, respond to one another's thoughts, and respectfully challenge those ideas they feel need to be tested. This contributes to the intellectual tenor of the class.

In typical classrooms, students work in groups cooperatively, but they are not asked to really think things through together or to intellectually challenge each other.

The English teachers in the effective programs draw from a broad scope of instructional approaches. They are enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and dedicated, and their students—most of whom live in poorer, urban neighborhoods—are active and engaged and “minds on” in class. These students are beating the odds, as evidenced by their school work and their test scores on statewide exams.

While the more typical schools in the study want students

to do better, and take action towards that goal, they lack the systematic, organized, highly informed and participatory features that pervade the more successful schools. Sometimes one or some of the features described above are in place, but not all. However, when all the features permeate the educational environment, they add the comprehensiveness that English programs require to make a difference in helping all students attain the language and literacy skills they need.

*For more information, contact aireadmin@uamail.albany.edu or visit <http://www.albany.edu/cela>. The full report is available at <http://www.albany.edu/cela/publication/brochure/features.pdf> or by contacting CELA

The Center on English Learning & Achievement is dedicated to improving student learning and achievement in English as it is learned as a subject and in the other academic disciplines. The Center is operated by the University at Albany, State University of New York.



NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTER ON ENGLISH LEARNING & ACHIEVEMENT (CELA)
University at Albany, SUNY, ED-B9
1400 Washington Ave., Albany, NY 12222
voice: 518-442-5026
fax: 518-442-5933
e-mail: aireadmin@uamail.albany.edu
website: <http://www.albany.edu/cela>